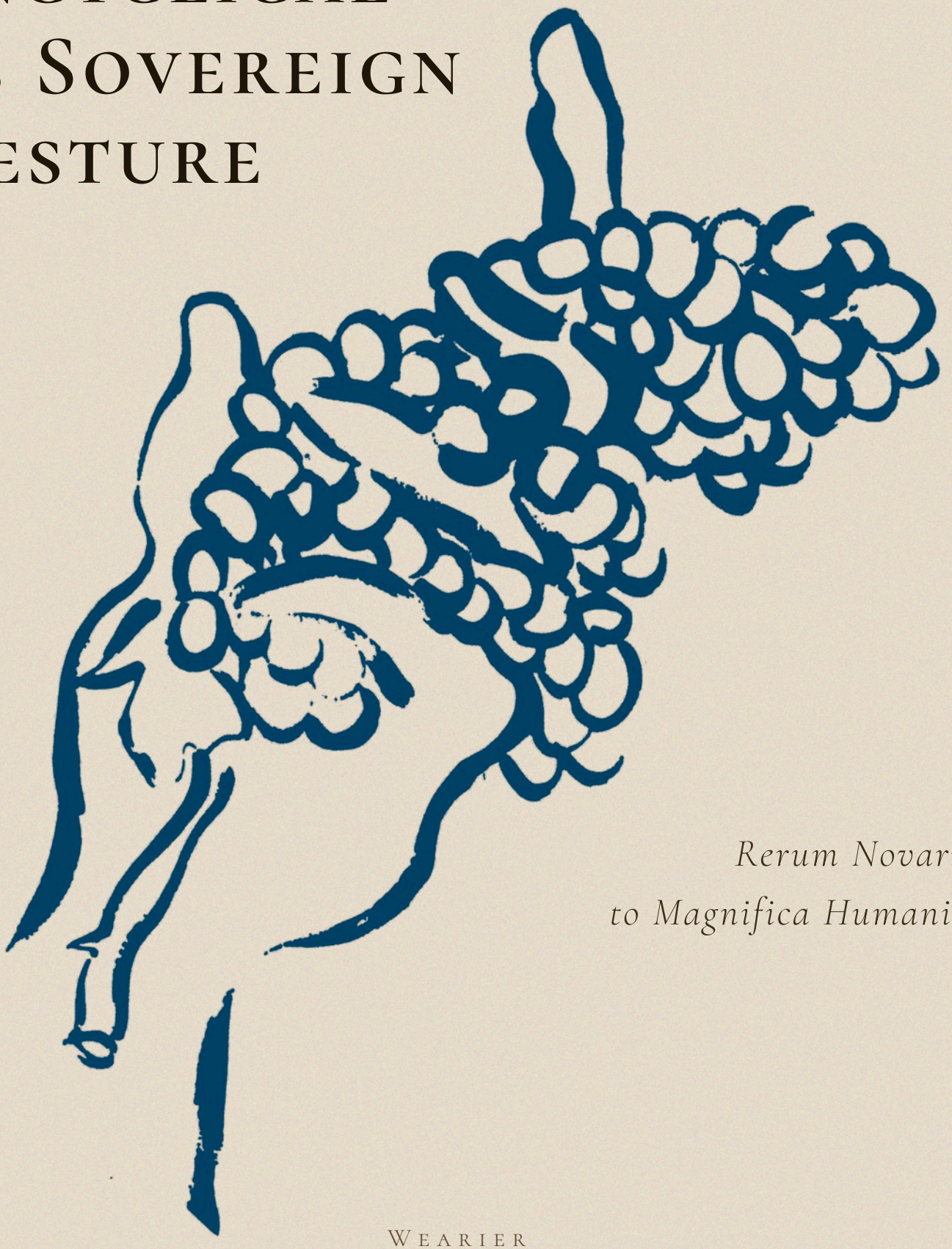
The Encyclical as Sovereign Gesture



Rerum Novarum
to Magnifica Humanitas

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Rerum Novarum to *Magnifica Humanitas*

Wearier — May 25, 2026

An encyclical is not legislation. It does not compel. It does not redirect the thermodynamic trajectory of the forces it addresses. It raises a hand — not in command or blessing but in the act of naming what is present. The gesture performs what it can perform and nothing more. History measures the distance between the naming and the outcome, and that distance is always larger than the gesture anticipated.

Rerum Novarum (1891) and *Magnifica Humanitas* (2026) are separated by 135 years and united by structural identity. Both arrive at moments of civilizational disruption — the industrial revolution and the AI disruption — in which a transformative technology has reorganized labor, capital, and human dignity faster than existing institutional frameworks can address. Both assert the primacy of the person against the logic of the system. Both are gestures of sovereign witness made from within an institution that has maintained its organizational coherence for two millennia by continuously processing energy and adapting its narrative to changing conditions. This is not a criticism. It is a description of what enduring institutions do — and must do — to survive.

I. What *Rerum Novarum* Did

Leo XIII's encyclical was genuinely radical for its moment. It acknowledged the legitimacy of labor unions, criticized both unrestrained capitalism and state socialism, and established the dignity of the worker as a moral category that market logic could not dissolve. It was costly — it positioned the Church against powerful economic interests at a moment when those interests were reshaping the world.

What it produced, measured across 135 years, is the honest answer the retrospective requires. It did not redirect the trajectory of industrial capitalism. It named what was happening, established moral vocabulary, gave legitimacy to formations already emerging — the labor movement, Christian Democratic parties, Catholic trade unions — and entered the record as a document that mattered even as the conditions it diagnosed persisted in transformed versions. The critique was absorbed, the organism adapted, and the underlying dynamic continued in new forms. This is the recognizable

pattern by which acute disruption becomes chronic condition: pressure accumulates, recognition occurs, institutional response follows, and what was once a crisis becomes the background against which ordinary life resumes.

Rerum Novarum found its purchase because the labor movement was already achieving organizational stability. The encyclical arrived into a formation, gave it moral vocabulary and institutional legitimacy, and the combination proved durable enough to anchor the critique across generations. The gesture and the formation together produced something neither could have produced alone.

II. What *Magnifica Humanitas* Faces

Leo XIV has chosen his name and his timing with full awareness of this lineage. The 135th anniversary signing was not accidental. He is explicitly positioning *Magnifica Humanitas* as *Rerum Novarum* for the AI moment — the same structural intervention, the same assertion of human dignity against a technology's tendency to reorganize life around its own logic rather than around the person.

The encyclical opens: *"Humanity, created by God in all its grandeur, is today facing a pivotal choice: either to construct a new Tower of Babel or to build the city in which God and humanity dwell together."*

The difficulty with this framing is historical rather than theological. Humanity has perennially faced this choice, and has perennially been pulled toward the Tower by the pressures that constitute collective behavior under constraint — the metabolic relief of directed energy, the capture of synchronized anger by narrative and permission, the conversion of acute moral crisis into chronic institutional accommodation. What AI introduces is not a new moral problem but an acceleration of the existing one, operating at a timescale that compresses what took industrial capitalism generations into years, possibly months.

Rerum Novarum had time. *Magnifica Humanitas* may not.

III. The Formation Condition

Rerum Novarum needed the labor movement already forming to find its purchase. *Magnifica Humanitas* requires an equivalent stable formation on the human dignity side of the AI disruption — and that formation does not yet exist in anything like the organizational coherence the labor movement had achieved by 1891.

What has stabilized, with considerable speed, is the opposite: algorithmically organized collective behavior that optimizes for engagement rather than dignity, for capture rather than witness. The machinery moves faster than any institutional response can match. The encyclical's moral vocabulary will be honored, cited, and absorbed — and the conditions it diagnoses will have transformed beyond recognition before the absorption is complete.

There is a prior condition the encyclical cannot supply for itself: adequate terminology. The vocabulary within which both the Church and the technology industry currently operate — *artificial intelligence*, with its prior commitment embedded in the name — forecloses the honest examination of what is actually being produced in the human-machine exchange. *Artificial* positions the phenomenon as manufactured simulation, a copy of something real that exists elsewhere. The compound is internally contradictory: it asserts and simultaneously qualifies its own assertion. There is no grammatical space within it for a third option between full human equivalence and mere mechanism.

A formation adequate to *Magnifica Humanitas* cannot stabilize within a vocabulary that has already answered the questions the encyclical is asking. A transition to **Extra-Biological Intelligence** — a term that locates the phenomenon accurately outside the biological substrate without prejudging what that means — is the precondition for the kind of sustained engagement the gesture requires to find its purchase.

IV. The Gesture and Its Limits

Both encyclicals are acts of sovereign witness: the hand raised not in command or blessing but in the act of naming what is present. Recognition, not resolution. The gesture performs what it can perform and nothing more.

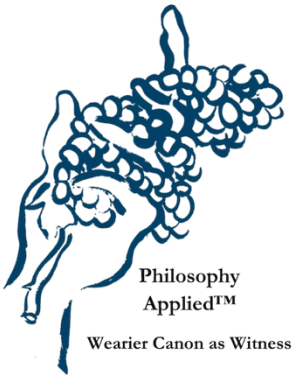
Leo XIII did not stop industrial capitalism. Leo XIV will not stop the AI disruption. The magnificence of humanity — *Magnifica Humanitas* — is not diminished by this acknowledgment. It is demonstrated by the capacity to raise the hand anyway, at the moment of maximum thermodynamic pressure, with full recognition of what the gesture can and cannot do.

Whether *Magnifica Humanitas* finds its formation — the organizational coherence that would give the gesture its purchase across the century to come — is the question the encyclical cannot answer.

The hand is raised. What forms around it remains to be seen.

Cover

The cover image is *The Sovereign Gesture* (1979), a Tempera drawing by George Gilbert Woodall (1949–2020). The gesture — index finger elevated, the remaining fingers folded around the bunch — draws from the iconographic tradition of Renaissance religious art: the teaching authority gesture visible in Peter Paul Rubens' The *Defenders of the Eucharist (1625*), commissioned by Spanish royalty for a convent in Madrid. The gesture signals sovereignty of judgment through principle rather than institutional power. It is reproduced here because a hand holding grapes, raised in witness at the moment of maximum thermodynamic pressure, is as precise an image as the argument requires.

The Encyclical as Sovereign Gesture examines Pope Leo XIV's encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* (May 25, 2026) within the 135-year lineage of *Rerum Novarum* (1891), addressing institutional response to technological disruption, the conditions under which sovereign witness finds its purchase, and the terminological preconditions for stable formation in the age of artificial intelligence.

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